

# A furry friend to stroke may keep heart attacks away

**Sarah Lonsdale**

OWNING a cat or dog can drastically reduce the chances of having a heart attack, according to research published today. Until now, the theory that pets had a calming effect on their owners had only been based on pulse rate readings before and after stroking animals.

But research based on blood samples of 5,700 people now shows that dog and cat owners have lower levels of cholesterol and triglycerides (free fatty acids) and lower blood pressure levels than non-pet owners.

Vets now suggest that doctors with patients who are at risk of heart attacks should prescribe a pet. But it must be a pet the patient can lavish affection on, because the health benefits centre on the amount of love that passes between pet and owner.

Scientists in Australia measured cholesterol and triglyceride levels — heart disease risk indicators — in people attending a clinic offering free coronary risk evaluation. They were asked whether they kept a pet.

Male pet owners of all ages and women pet owners aged 40-59 had significantly lower levels of the free fatty acids. Male pet owners also had significantly lower blood-pressure levels. The results were better than readings for people on

cholesterol-lowering medication.

The scientists, led by Dr Warwick Anderson of the Baker Medical Research Institute in Victoria, could find no explanation other than pet ownership. The only sociological difference between the two groups was that the pet owners appeared to drink slightly more than people without a furry friend.

The findings are published today at the sixth annual Animals and Us conference in Montreal, Canada. Delegate vet Dr Bruce Fogle, commenting on the research, said: 'We already know that a person's pulse rate goes down when they stroke an animal they are attached to. But these findings really go a long way to prove the physiological benefits of owning and loving an animal.'

He said it appeared that humans benefited from the unquestioning, 'superabundant' love that animals gave their owners. 'I often have mothers who come to my clinic and confide in me that they love their dogs more than their children. It's a different class of love, and human beings thrive on it.'

According to Dr Fogle, the beneficial effect of pet ownership dates back to man's primitive past, when in domesticating animals he had to understand them to survive.